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ABSTRACT

Historically, vocational education has been targeted at those destined for nonprofessional work, and vocational teachers, administrators, and students have become isolated from the mainstream of secondary education. Research has found broader student participation in vocational education than anticipated, the numbers peaked in 1984 and now are suffering widespread decline. A new emphasis on vocational education over the "basic skills only" approach can better serve the majority of students who will work for smaller firms that cannot afford job training. A basic tenet of the new Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act is integration of academic and vocational education to reform the entire curriculum. The new law also directs federal resources to the poorest districts that need the most improvement. Perhaps the most significant change is that much of the initiative for setting goals to improve local programs should come from the local level. Recommendations for local school boards are to expand the name to vocational-technical education, expand program content, offer high quality programs to all students, form partnerships with business, and integrate female students. (YLB)

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Revamping vocational education

by Susan Barto

July 1, 1991 could mark the dawn of a new day for vocational education in the United States. On July 1, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 goes into effect for local school districts nationwide. While the brunt of attention to the new law has come from federal and state policy makers, the changes in vocational education will hit local districts in both their policy manuals and their pocketbooks.

The Perkins reauthorization comes at a time when we are seeing declining enrollments in vocational programs despite increasing demands from the workplace for technical skills. The recent push for higher graduation standards coupled with the traditional prestige of college preparatory programs largely has relegated vocational programs and their students to the bottom of the education barrel. The advent of this new Perkins Act, as one vocational educator put it, signals an attempt by Congress and the vocational education community to bring vocational programs, "both figuratively and literally, out of the basement and into the mainstream secondary curriculum."

The Act was signed into law in September 1990. Since then, the Department of Education has sponsored regional meetings to determine how to implement technical aspects of the law, which increased federal funding levels by 50 percent to $1.7 billion. The law eliminates specific, burdensome funding set-asides for special populations and targets funds for students in schools serving high concentrations of special populations. States still are awaiting final rules for the Department of Education, but major changes in the vocational education law can be grouped into four major categories:

- a shift away from the traditional job-skills orientation toward the broader purpose of integrating academic and applied technical skill instruction in vocational education programs;
- greater emphasis on directing federal resources for vocational education to those districts where the needs for reform and improvement are the greatest, i.e. districts with highest proportions of poor families, handicapped students, and limited English proficient students;
- restructuring of the relationship between the states and the local school districts in an effort to encourage the districts to provide greater leadership in reforming and improving vocational education than they have in the past. This reverses the historic pattern in which local vocational education programs were directly assisted and were monitored for their compliance with centrally determined standards; and
- a distinction between secondary and postsecondary levels of vocational education for the first time.

For a listing of activities authorized for funding, see the box on page 3.

History

To fully comprehend the magnitude of the Perkins reauthorization, it is helpful to review the history of vocational education in this country. Kenneth Gray, a professor in charge of vocational and industrial education at Pennsylvania State University, dates vocational education programs back to the turn of the century. (*Phi Delta Kappan*, February 1991) Schools then, like now, were criticized for placing the nation in jeopardy, writes Gray.

Critics suggested that the single, classical high school curriculum served the elite few but provided nothing of value to the majority. These critics demanded a curriculum better suited to the needs of the working class — those attending high school but not headed for the professions. This division of students into two separate curricular streams according to their probable station in life did not sit well with educators, Gray explains. Critics opposed "social predestination" and labeled as "mean and illiberal" vocational education that sought to teach trades before the age of 18 or 20. "The essential point," he says, "is that, from the beginning, vocational education has been class-specific — targeted at those destined for nonprofessional work."

Gray cites yet another historical trend that exacerbates today's problems in vocational education. Historically, teachers, administrators and students have become isolated from the mainstream of

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secondary education. For a while, Congress and educators hotly debated whether vocational education even belonged in the public schools. The issue was settled by the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which left it in the public school domain. Still, the Act resulted in setting vocational programs and their administration apart from the mainstream curriculum.

Who enrolls?

Prior to the Perkins reauthorization, Congress ordered the National Assessment of Vocational Education (NAVE), research from which the law's architects gleaned valuable enrollment and job placement data. Surprising to most observers was the finding that 97 percent of students take at least one vocational education course before graduating from high school.

According to NAVE, about 20 percent of all the high school courses taken by students are vocational education courses. The average high school student takes more credits of vocational education (4.2 credits) than of English (4.0 credits). These findings contradict the notion that vocational education courses are taken only by the bottom 20 percent or so of students.

John Wirt, who was Director of NAVE, points to an important implication of the finding: educators must transform school at the elementary and secondary levels into a process that equips all students — not just the college-bound — with higher-order capacities of thinking and reasoning. Also, Wirt suggests, look at what the 20 percent of time that all students spend in vocational education contributes. If vocational education were reformed, what could it contribute? And how does it relate to the other 80 percent of time? (*Phi Delta Kappan*, February 1991)

In terms of job placement, NAVE found that the rate at which students are getting good jobs in the fields for which they are trained is generally low. Only about 38 percent of the vocational education courses yielded job skills young workers were using in good gobs 16 months after graduation. (A good job is defined as one requiring a medium or high level of skill — that is, more than three months' training.)

Declining enrollments

While NAVE found much broader student participation than anticipated, the numbers peaked in 1984 and now are suffering widespread decline. Between 1984 and 1988, vocational education enrollments declined in 32 states, in some cases dramatically.

The National Center for Research in Vocational Education cites several reasons for the decline:

- declining high school enrollments
- new graduation requirements — 45 states have increased high school graduation requirements
- student preference for higher education.

Between 1960 and 1980, college enrollment rates of high school graduates fluctuated around 50 percent. Beginning in the early 1980s, college enrollment grew dramatically reaching 55 percent by 1984 and peaking at 59 percent in 1988. Gray asserts that schools have created a "go-to-college mentality," resulting in peer pressure not to enroll in vocational education curricula. "This occupation bigotry or snobbishness is all too often tolerated (if not enforced) by some high school educators who, often with good intentions, communicate that anything but college preparation is virtually a sentence to occupational Siberia and a second-class life," Gray writes.

Gray goes on to explain why a new emphasis on vocational education over the "basic skills only" approach can better serve students and the economy. He notes that while many chief executives of large corporations are supporters of basic-skills-only education, 60 percent of all young workers work not for large corporations but for firms that employ fewer than 100 people; 40 percent work for firms employing fewer than 20. Research shows that the less education an individual has, the more likely he or she is to work in the smallest of firms. Smaller employers, especially in technical fields, cannot afford the cost of much on-the-job training.

Integration

A basic tenet of the new Perkins law is integration of academic and vocational education to reform the entire curriculum. Larry Rosenstock, an 11-year veteran to vocational education and a Harvard lecturer, notes that in the 1984 hearing on the reauthorization of the Perkins Act, it was considered blasphemy to suggest that schools integrate vocational and academic education. In the 1989 Senate hearings, however, virtually every commentator noted the need to bring them together. (*Phi Delta Kappan*, February 1991)

- The challenge, writes Rosenstock, is to find ways of broadening the vocational curriculum and of making applied learning part of the curriculum for all students. The Perkins Act now requires vocational programs to provide students with "experience in and understanding of all aspects of an industry." This, Rosenstock suggests, is not unlike the way vocational agriculture has traditionally been taught — a combination of instruction and experience in all aspects of running a farm. "Students not only

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Authorized use of 1990 Perkins Act funds

Under the new law, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act, funds may be used in support of :

- upgrading curriculum
- purchasing and adapting new equipment — including instructional aids
- inservice training of vocational and academic instructors to support integration of academic and vocational education
- guidance and counseling
- remedial courses
- hiring a special populations coordinator
- apprenticeship programs
- occupational training programs for adults and students
- comprehensive teacher mentor programs at postsecondary institutions
- education and training activities through institutions, employers, labor organizations, etc.

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learn the technical skills of planting and the use of farm implements; they also learn the financing and planning of a farm, and they study soil chemistry, animal husbandry, issues concerning chemicals, occupational health and safety, marketing, cash flow, botany, and the role of agriculture in our society."

Rosemary Kolde, associate superintendent of the Great Oaks Joint Vocational School District in Cincinnati, Ohio, provides another example of integrated curriculum: when culinary arts students study percentages in their mathematics class. The math teacher instructs the class on how to figure percentages and gives them a number of problems that involve the use of percentages in the food service industry. The students are given diagrams showing how a side of beef is blocked out into different cuts, each weighing a certain number of pounds. They then are taught how to find the percentage of each wholesale or primal cut. The culinary arts instructor then builds on the basic mathematical concept of percentage in the vocational laboratory by assigning students the job of placing a restaurant order with the local slaughterhouse.

What are the specific benefits of an integrated curriculum? Kolde lists the following:

- when academic and vocational instructors cooperate in the development of instructional materials, such as learning guides and job-plan sheets, the materials are better organized and of higher quality;
- the cooperative effort of the academic and vocational instructors to integrate mathematics and science concepts into technical applications makes the curriculum more rigorous and gives it greater continuity;
- the application of both abstract and concrete approaches to learning enhances student knowledge;
- the more intensified curriculum and the use of learning activity guides enable students to progress at their own pace;
- cooperatively developed materials help students to be better prepared in class to complete tasks and solve problems;
- when the instructional staff works together, the student benefits from having access to several experts rather than just one;
- students score higher on paper and pencil achievement tests and on tests of technical performance; and
- students are more highly motivated and have lower rates of absenteeism.

New funding structure

The new law also transforms the structure of federal funding. States must distribute 75 percent of the basic grants to local districts and post-secondary institutions. The remaining 25 percent is for administration, leadership training activities and partnerships, displaced homemakers and sex equity programs, and correctional facility programs.

All federal basic grant funds for vocational education at both secondary and post-secondary levels will be distributed according to a specified formula:

- 70% on the number of students in Chapter 1
- 20% on the number of students who are handicapped
- 10% on the total number of students

This formula will result in the most money going to the poorest districts — programs NAVE showed needed the most improvement. The rules specifically target federal funds on "sites" rather than on students with the hope that results will flow over to all students in programs.

The minimum grant to a local secondary level program is now $15,000. Under the previous law the median sized grant to local, secondary level recipients was less than $8,000. The law also authorizes $125 million for technology preparation projects that link the last two years of secondary vocational education training with the first two years of a postsecondary program, leading to an associate's degree.

Local initiative

Some see the most significant change being that Congress has for the first time said that much of the initiative for setting goals to improve local programs and the implementation of plans for reaching those goals should come from the local level and not from the states. States are required to develop student performance standards two years after enactment and report on efforts to implement the new law. Local recipients, however, should develop their own plans for using federal funds; previously only a state plan had been required. Also, previously states were required by federal law to project training needs and specify requirements for new programs; local institutions now are expected to conduct assessments.

Board's role

A dialogue between professional education experts and school board leaders from NSBA's five regions resulted in the publication *Education Reform for the '90s: The School Board Agenda*. One of the five areas discussed was vocational education. The agenda they developed included the following recommendations for local Boards:

- Expand the name of vocational education to vocational-technical edu-

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cation to reflect the realities of the workplace and a broader range of activity than "working with your hands."

- Expand the content of vocational education to take in basic skills, application of skills to jobs, work ethic, entry-level job market skills, cooperative learning, and self-employment skills.
- Offer quality vocational education programs to all students. End vocational education "tracking" by fusing vocational and academic instruction; by eliminating the general education diplomas that are usually "a mishmash of courses without goals;" and by sponsoring awareness programs to fight prejudice regarding the caliber of vocational education students.
- Move towards certification of either the schools' vocational program or individual staff members.
- Form long-term, mutually beneficial active partnerships with businesses that open avenues to work-learning experiences, program evaluation, staff training, and donations of funds and resources.
- Evaluate and assess grading methods and transcript formats that discourage college-bound student from taking vocational courses because lower-than-"A" grades would threaten their grade-point-average (GPA).
- Fully integrate female students into all aspects of vocational education.

(Copies of *The School Board Agenda*, a leadership report distributed to all NSBA Direct Affiliate districts, are available for $15.00 from NSBA. In addition to vocational education, the publication discusses restructuring, technology, teachers and administrators, and early childhood education.)

The American Vocational Association (AVA) has prepared a 172-page synopsis of the new law entitles *AVA Guide to the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990*. It is intended to help local and state vocational education administrators prepare for implementing the new law. For more information contact AVA, Dept. 890, 1410 King St., Alexandria, VA 22314, (703)683-3111. (*Education Week*, November 1990.) ■